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Mailing Address:

Rev. Nathaniel Dreyer

IVE Press, The Incarnate Word,

5706 Sargent Rd.

Chillum, MD 20782-2321

USA

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Articles

❖ The Problem of Sovereignty	
<i>Fr. Julio Meinvielle, Ph.D., S.T.D.</i>	3
I. False Doctrine Regarding Sovereignty	8
II. The Divine Origin of Sovereignty	13
III. Democratism and Democracy	16
IV. Democracy and Catholics	19
V. Human Law of Political Regimes	21
VI. On Submission to Power	33
VII. Resistance to Abusive Power	37
VIII. On the Illegitimacy of Power	41
❖ Brief Essay on the Nature and Method of Metaphysics	
<i>Fr. Andres Ayala, Ph.D., IVE</i>	47
I. Metaphysics as a Science	50
II. The Four Instances of Scientific Reasoning	51
III. The Four Instances of Scientific Reasoning in Metaphysics	54
IV. Some Clarifications	58
1. The Notion of <i>Ens</i> and Metaphysics	58
2. The Notion of Participation and Metaphysics	60
3. The Principle of Causality and Metaphysics	61
V. Advantages of This View of Metaphysics	61
VI. The Path of Metaphysics in Terms of Participation	62
VII. Resolution and Separation in Metaphysics	64
Conclusion	69
Appendix 1: In What Sense is God Object of Metaphysics for Aquinas?	70
Appendix 2: Approach to Fabro's Notion of Resolution	73
❖ <i>Amor Sui</i>—The Ego-Logical Structure of Freedom	
<i>Fr. Alberto Barattero, IVE, Ph.D.</i>	87
I. Introduction	89
1. Absoluteness of the "I"	89
2. Freedom	91
II. The Ego-Logical Structure of Freedom in Act	93

1. Circulation	93
2. <i>Amor Sui</i>	97
3. Amor Sui and Happiness	106
❖ The Metaphysical-Existential Synthetcity of Freedom in the “Essential Thomism” of Cornelio Fabro	
<i>Fr. Gianluca Trombini, IVE, Ph.D.</i>	113
Division of the Article and Questions Addressed . . .	120
I. Metaphysical foundation of freedom	121
II. Existential Foundation of Freedom	127
III. Metaphysical-Existential Synthetcity of Freedom and Metaphysical-Existential Constitution of the “I”	130
Conclusion	134
❖ Natural Foundations in Man for the Reception of Grace According to Thomas Aquinas	
<i>Sr. Mary Dove of Simplicity Willis, SSVM</i>	137
Introduction	139
I. Constitutive Moment: Man Made in God’s Image . .	140
II. Dynamic Moment: Ordered to the End of Eternal Beatitude	143
III. The Need and Capacity for Grace	147
1. Man’s Radical Finitude	147
2. Obediential Potency	149
3. The Assistance of Grace	152
Conclusion	154
❖ Kierkegaard and Luther: Agreement and Disagreement	
<i>Fr. Cornelio Fabro, CSS, Ph.D., S.T.D.</i>	159

Book Reviews

— Donald G. Boland; <i>Ethics Today and Saint Thomas Aquinas: A Complete Course on Moral Philosophy for Our Time and All Times</i>	175
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— Seb Falk; <i>The Light Ages: The Surprising Story of Medieval Science</i>	178
— Yonghua Ge; <i>The Many and the One: Creation as Participation in Augustine and Aquinas</i>	182
— Can Lawrence Löwe; <i>Thomas Aquinas on the Metaphysics of the Human Act</i>	187
— Fr. Brian Mullady, O.P.; <i>St. Thomas Aquinas Rescues Modern Psychology</i>	191

BRIEF ESSAY ON THE NATURE AND METHOD OF
METAPHYSICS

Fr. Andres Ayala, Ph.D., IVE
Emmitsburg, MD

THERE SEEMS TO BE SOME CONFUSION regarding the nature and method of Thomistic metaphysics. Part of this confusion regards the very object of metaphysics: is it God, is it *ens* ["being" as noun] or is it *esse* ["being" as act of being]? There is confusion also regarding "resolution" in metaphysics: regarding its meaning, its role in the metaphysical method and its ending point. Most importantly, there needs to be more clarity regarding the order of problems in metaphysics: can we demonstrate the composition *essentia-esse* in every being without having demonstrated the existence of God? Finally, a clarification seems required regarding the development of certain notions: more precisely, are the notions of being and participation with which one demonstrates the existence of God quite the same as the notions of being and participation with which one demonstrates the composition *essentia-esse*?

It is true, St. Thomas did not write his own treatise on metaphysics but one may rightly suspect that he knew perfectly what metaphysics was about. We have some indications of Aquinas' metaphysical doctrine in several places, some of which have been either forgotten or misunderstood.¹ Moreover, there have been important developments in our understanding of Thomistic metaphysics, thanks especially to Cornelio Fabro's rediscovery of the centrality of the notions of participation and *actus essendi*.

My intention with these brief remarks is to offer, as it were, an orientation regarding the nature and method of metaphysics, keeping in mind especially Aquinas' text, so that the aforementioned confusions might be avoided and metaphysics may again claim its rightful place as "science."² My concern is not mainly ensuring a methodological order in metaphysics but contributing to metaphysics' demonstrative rigour. Indeed,

¹ I have in mind particularly Aquinas, *In Boethii De Trinitate*, q. 6, a. 1, *Ad tertiam questionem*.

² My intention, therefore, is neither resolving the metaphysical problems themselves nor producing the required demonstrations, as would be the task of a complete metaphysical treatise.

what kind of certainty could be produced by a metaphysical endeavour vitiated by circular reasoning, that is, by presupposing what has not yet been demonstrated?

The sources of inspiration for these lines are Tavuzzi's article "Aquinas on Resolution in Metaphysics" and his course at the *Angelicum* on Aquinas' Commentary on Boethius' *De Trinitate*.³ This sketch may have many limitations, but I hope is at least thought-provoking and encouraging of more precise and learned elucidations.⁴

I. METAPHYSICS AS A SCIENCE

Metaphysics is a science, the science providing us with the ultimate truth about reality, the science allowing us to understand reality as a whole and in its deepest mystery.

Metaphysics is a human science: therefore, the reality we are talking about is the reality proportionate to our human intellect, which is created being. On its own, no human intellect can have access to the reality of God himself. In metaphysics, we arrive at knowing God as cause and also at knowing many things about God, but we cannot grasp His essence. God's intimate mystery is not the object of metaphysics but, instead, the object of a different science which is called "Theology" or "Sacred Doctrine."⁵ This means that the *formal* object of meta-

3 Cf. Michael Tavuzzi, "Aquinas on Resolution in Metaphysics," *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review* 55, no. 2 (April 1991): 199–227; Michael Tavuzzi, "Tommaso D'Aquino, In Boetium De Trinitate" (Course, Pontifical University St. Thomas Aquinas: Rome, Winter 2004).

4 I thank Nancy Marrocco for her careful copy-editing and valuable suggestions, and Fr. Richard Yevchak, IVE for his English corrections with an eye to correct philosophical expression.

5 Cf. Aquinas, *In Metaphysicorum*, Prooemium, in finem: "From this it is evident that, although this science [metaphysics or first philosophy] studies the three things mentioned above [i.e., first causes, most universal principles like being in general and separate substances], it does not investigate any one of them as its subject, but only being in general. For the subject of a science is the genus whose causes and properties we seek, and not the causes themselves of the particular genus studied; for a knowledge of the causes of some genus is the goal to which the investigation of a science attains"; Aquinas, *In*

physics is not that which is really (*in re*) separated from matter (the separate substances) but that which is notionally separated from it, insofar as *ens qua ens* (being as such) does not necessarily imply matter.⁶

Metaphysics is a science and, therefore, must produce certainty. The certainty of a science depends on its principles being evidently true and on its reasoning being conformed to the rules of logic. Metaphysics must depart from things that cannot possibly be denied and move from there. Metaphysics must reason and use human intelligence in a perfectly coherent and logical way. Were this not so, we would not have a science but a “talking about words” or a meaningless talk.

II. THE FOUR INSTANCES OF SCIENTIFIC REASONING

Scientific reasoning, for Aquinas, is instantiated in four types. Because metaphysics is a science, those four types are found in metaphysics.⁷ What are these four instances of scientific reasoning? They comprise two kinds of resolution, and two kinds of composition. Let us explain, firstly, what resolution and composition mean and, secondly, the kinds of resolution and composition.⁸

Boethii De Trinitate, q. 5, a. 4 c.; a. 1, c. in finem. For more complete references and Latin texts, see *Appendix*: “In What Sense is God Object of Metaphysics for Aquinas” at the end of this article.

6 Cf. Jason Mitchell, *Being and Participation: The Method and Structure of Metaphysical Reflection According to Cornelio Fabro*, PhD diss., vol. 1 (Rome: Pontifical Athenaeum Regina Apostolorum, 2012), 345: “In *Introduzione all'esistenzialismo*, Fabro holds that in the *genus subiectum* of metaphysics, *ens in quantum est ens*, ens means “that which participates in being.” Consequently, God is not included under the *subiectum* of metaphysics, nor is the act of being (*esse*) the *subiectum* of metaphysics” (Jesús Villagrasa, “La resolutio come metodo della metafisica secondo Cornelio Fabro,” *Alpha Omega* 4, no. 1 (2001): 53).

7 However, not all four types need to be found in all sciences. In mathematics, for example, there is no reasoning *secundum rem*.

8 Cf. *In Boethii De Trinitate*, q. 6, a. 1, *Ad tertiam questionem*. Cf. also Tavuzzi, “Aquinas on Resolution in Metaphysics.”

Resolution is like finding the one through the many, is a reasoning process which departs from the many and finds in the end a unity which explains or grounds the many. Resolution finishes in the understanding of a unity. Resolution is not only a process, but includes also the end of that process. Resolution finishes in an understanding of a certain “oneness,” but an understanding of this oneness “through the many:” that is, we depart from the many and, reasoning through them, we arrive at understanding this “oneness.”

Science, however, does not finish in the contemplation of the one, but rather in the contemplation of the many as in a certain sense one. We really “know” something when we can see it in a unifying vision. We really know “reality” when we can contemplate it with a unifying vision. Reality is multiple and we must somehow “explain” it, make sense of it: to make sense is to find unity in the many.

Science, therefore, continues with a process of “composition.” Composition is the re-interpretation of the many in the light of the “oneness” which we have discovered in resolution. Composition is coming back to the many and seeing the many in the light of the principle we have discovered in resolution. Composition allows us to discover in the many those things that must necessarily be so in the light of that which has been discovered in resolution. Thus, composition gives us not simply “understanding” but “wisdom,” a sapiential vision of reality.

It is interesting to note that in resolution we see (or understand) the one *through the many* whereas in composition we see (or understand) the many *through the one*. This composition is the unifying vision we want to achieve in metaphysics. Metaphysics does not finish in resolution (arriving at the one) but in composition (referring the many to the one).

In speculative sciences, according to St. Thomas, resolution and composition can be of two kinds: *secundum rem* (with regard to real things) and *secundum rationem* (with regard to true notions). Thus, resolution *secundum rem* will be to find the one thing which is the principle of the many. Resolution *secun-*

dum rationem will be to find the one notion which ultimately explains or defines the many notions or, perhaps better said, the notion to which all other notions are ultimately reduced in some sense. Composition *secundum rem* will be to reinterpret the many things in the light of a certain unity we have discovered (*i.e.*, the real cause), and composition *secundum rationem* will be to reinterpret the many notions in the light of a certain unity (*i.e.*, the notion of the science's formal object).

If these four types of reasoning were found in one science, it would seem that whatever is *secundum rem* must be previous to that which is *secundum rationem*: because whatever is in the mind (true notions) must come from the sensible reality which we know first (real things). Moreover, since human knowledge begins from the many, each type of scientific resolution appears to come necessarily before its correspondent scientific composition. In fact, composition is reinterpretation of the many in light of the one which has been discovered in resolution and, therefore, each resolution is necessarily previous to its correspondent composition.

A beautiful text from Aquinas may help us to see another aspect of resolution and composition:

In every inquiry one must begin from some principle. And if this principle precedes both in knowledge and in being, the process is not resolute, but compositive: because to proceed from cause to effect is to proceed in a compositive way, since causes are more simple than effects. But if that which precedes in knowledge is later in the order of being, the process is one of resolution, as when our judgment deals with effects, which by resolution we trace to their simple causes.⁹

⁹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II q. 14 a. 5, c. in Villagrasa, "La resolutive come metodo della metafisica secondo Cornelio Fabro," 49: "In omni inquisitione oportet incipere ab aliquo principio. Quod quidem si, sicut est prius in cognitione, ita etiam sit prius in esse, non est processus resolutorius, sed magis compositivus, procedere enim a causis in effectus, est processus compositivus, nam causae sunt simpliciores effectibus. Si autem id quod est prius in cognitione, sit posterius in esse, est processus resolutorius, utpote cum de

St. Thomas is speaking explicitly of resolution and composition *secundum rem*, because he is referring to reasoning regarding extrinsic causality. However, something similar could be said regarding resolution and composition *secundum rationem*. When the notions from which one departs are not the most universal, the reasoning process is one of resolution; whereas when the notion from which one departs is most universal, the process is one of composition. As may be seen, there is a correspondence between the cause's priority in being and the notion's priority in universality: as the more universal notion is more abstract, so also the cause is more separated from matter. Moreover, as the most abstract notion is first in universality but is known last by human beings, the first cause is first in perfection but known last by human beings.

III. THE FOUR INSTANCES OF SCIENTIFIC REASONING IN METAPHYSICS¹⁰

The path of metaphysics, then, from a Thomistic point of view, requires the following:¹¹

1. Resolution *secundum rem*. We contemplate reality and find the many. These many are the many "things" or many "beings" which we see in reality and which we want to explain in their deepest mystery.¹² Reasoning through the many, we arrive at the existence of God, who is the *real* principle of the many (*i.e.*, the cause), and understand Him as "*Ipsum Esse Subsistens*," that is, as the real existing Being Itself, a real pure Act of Being, whose essence is just being, most simple being.

effectibus manifestis iudicamus, resolvendo in causas simplices."

10 In what follows, I will seemingly go over the same divisions several times, although each time the focus will be different, and further clarifications will be added.

11 In what follows, the distribution of topics which I suggest at each stage of the metaphysical path is inspired by Tavuzzi's remarks in his course on Aquinas' Commentary on Boethius' *De Trinitate* (see Bibliography).

12 There is already a notion of being here, but it is not yet the formal object of metaphysics. I will explain later this distinction.

2. Resolution *secundum rationem*. At this moment of the metaphysical path, we endeavour to arrive at that one notion of being (*ens*) which explains and “defines” all the different kinds of beings (beings = the many). Here we grasp the formal object of metaphysics: we understand “being” (*ens*) as “that which participates *esse*.”¹³

Note: we could not have arrived at this notion of *ens* (“that which participates *esse*”) if we had not arrived first at the notion of God as *Ipsum Esse Subsistens*. Why? The first reason is that we can understand the condition of “being by participation” as belonging to *every* being other than the First Being precisely because we have understood this First Being as *ipsum esse subsistens*, which can be one only.¹⁴ The second reason is that it makes no sense to talk about participating *esse* (in the strong sense of *esse ut actus essendi*) if *esse* is not seen first as a real (separate) perfection, different from the specific perfections of all beings.

In this resolution *secundum rationem*, we grasp the deepest notion that can be applied to the many insofar as *all* beings can be explained with this notion: each of them is “that which participates *esse*.” This notion is at the same time the most general notion that can be applied to a creature, and the root of everything else that can be said of a creature as such. This is also why, at this point only, the object of metaphysics becomes available; the aspect under which a being is studied in metaphysics (the being’s participating in *esse*) was not accessible before the demonstration of God’s existence as *Ipsum Esse Subsistens*.

13 Cf. Aquinas, *In De Causis*, lect. 6: “*Ens* is said of that which in a certain finite way participates being and is proportionate to our intellect, whose object is that which is, as it is said in *III De Anima*. Thus the only things that can be perceived by our intellect are those which have a quiddity which participates being.” [*Ens autem dicitur id quod finite participat esse et hoc es proportionatum intellectui nostro, cuius objectum est ‘quod quid est’ ut dicitur in III de Anima. Unde illud solum est capibile ab intellectu nostro quod habet quidditatem participantem esse*].

14 Cf. Tavuzzi, “Aquinas on Resolution in Metaphysics,” 225–226. This is one of the crucial points I want to make and it will be elaborated upon later in this article.

tens.

3. Composition *secundum rem*: we reinterpret the many in the light of the unity we have found. Thus, whereas in resolution *secundum rem* we went from the effects to the cause, we now go from the cause to the effects. Only God (the real cause) is *ipsum esse subsistens*: if other beings are, all of them must be by participation. Now, if all *real* beings participate *esse*, then they must be composed of *esse* and something else, that is, *essence*.

Thus, at this moment of composition *secundum rem* we study the compositions of real beings: *essentia-esse*, substance-accident, matter-form. Now, the first composition is demonstrated while the other two compositions, already discussed in Aristotelian Physics, are reinterpreted and seen in a new light. Moreover, whereas the first and second composition belong strictly to all beings and are therefore metaphysical compositions, the third composition (matter and form) can also be studied in metaphysics as a particular instantiation of participating *esse* and of the act/potency composition.

Composition *secundum rem* is also the moment of understanding that all real (finite) beings must be caused by the *ipsum esse*, as St. Thomas argues in the *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 44, a. 1. That is, being composed and being caused are necessary consequences of being by participation, once being by participation has been understood in the light of the real being *per essentiam*, that is, God.

At this point a clarification may be useful. Even if both demonstrations rely on the principle of causality and the notion of participation, to demonstrate that the fact that there are (some) beings by participation demands the existence of God as a cause (*Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 2, a. 3, Fourth Way) is not the same as demonstrating that every finite being must be caused in its being by God (*Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 44, a. 1). The first syllogism ends in the affirmation of a fact, the second in the affirmation of a universal law. The subject of the first affirmation is God, the subject of the second affirmation is every finite *ens*. The predicate of the first affirmation is existence, the predicate

of the second is being caused. The first syllogism departs from some beings, whereas the second syllogism ends in a conclusion regarding all beings.

4. Composition *secundum rationem*: we reinterpret the notions of one, true, good, other pure or transcendental perfections (such as to live, to understand, etc.), the categories (substance, quantity, quality, relation, etc.) and other notions in the light of the concept of being, that is, in the light of the *ratio entis* found in resolution *secundum rationem*. The first principles, insofar as they depend on the notion of being, may be studied here in their metaphysical status, that is, in their own truth; but this does not mean that they are not operative before this point. Also the treatise on analogy, as a property of concepts (that is, as a way of predicating the metaphysical concepts of *ens*, *unum*, *verum*, *bonum*, etc.) seems to have its proper place here.

The term "composition" does not signify directly the study of compositions but the rational process which departs from that which is more simple and tries to understand that which is more composite in light of the simple. In composition *secundum rem*, that which is more simple is the cause, whereas in composition *secundum rationem*, that which is more simple is the notion of the formal object. Moreover, composition is not a process of deducing the composite from the simple. We neither deduce the effects' existence from the understanding of the cause, nor do we deduce all concepts from one concept. Composition is a process of reinterpreting already-known effects in the light of an understanding of the cause (in resolution *secundum rem*) and already-known concepts in the light of an understanding of a basic, more universal concept (in resolution *secundum rationem*). Certainly, in composition we make apodictic deductions, but not as if we were unpacking what is already contained in the understanding of the "one."

Now, I would like to emphasize what I consider one of the most important points in this present research. Resolution *secundum rationem* cannot be made before resolution *secundum rem*. The reason is that one cannot make a universal judgment

regarding every finite being before arriving at the infinite being. Indeed, we can say something about every finite being only by opposition to the infinite being (*esse per essentiam*) which can be one only: thus, every *other* being must be by participation. Nothing prevents us from arriving to the infinite being departing from some beings, but there is no way to make a judgment about every being, which we have not experienced, unless we “separate” all other beings from the infinite being which we have found.¹⁵

Why should resolution *secundum rationem* finish in a universal notion of being? Because metaphysics intends to elucidate reality from the highest possible standpoint. Now, this standpoint is that aspect of reality which makes every being be precisely being, that aspect by which something belongs to reality. Now, this aspect is neither the fact that a being is material nor the fact that a being is immaterial. The object of metaphysics is not this or that group of beings but all beings, and in that aspect which makes them beings (this is what *ens qua ens* means, being as such). Therefore, this aspect is something which can be found in all beings and, as we have said, becomes available only after finding the cause of some beings and understanding it as *Ipsium Esse Subsistens*.

In this brief sketch of the metaphysical path I have intended neither to make a complete list of the topics that could be treated at each step, nor to discuss how or from which point of view each topic should be treated.

IV. SOME CLARIFICATIONS

1. The Notion of *Ens* and Metaphysics

The resolution *secundum rem* begins by the existential and factual “many.” Many “things,” many “beings”: at this point, there is an initial notion of being which is still not metaphysically “purified.” This notion of being, in fact, is the point of departure for understanding anything, and here a point of de-

¹⁵ Cf. Tavuzzi, “Aquinas on Resolution in Metaphysics,” 226–226.

parture for arriving at the existence of God. In the resolution *secundum rationem*, instead, we will arrive at the metaphysical notion of *ens*, which is the formal object of metaphysics. Therefore, there is a notion of *ens* at the beginning of the resolution *secundum rem* and another, deeper one at the end of the resolution *secundum rationem*.¹⁶ The latter notion depends on the former and on the demonstration of God's existence. Metaphysics finds its proper formal object as a science only at the end of resolution *secundum rationem*:¹⁷ only then do we understand what is meant by *ens* as such, that is, "that which participates *esse*." Many sciences study real beings whereas metaphysics studies real beings from a particular point of view, that is, insofar as real beings "are" and this, in turn, insofar as real beings "participate *esse*." Now, even if only at this point does metaphysics find its formal object of speculation, metaphysics does not begin at this point: the process to arrive at this point is also part of metaphysics.

Another way to show that the object of metaphysics is a particular notion of *ens* is the following. Metaphysics is a speculative science. A speculative science must have a universal object, something "*speculabilis*" (i.e. something which can be an object of speculation). This object is the notion of *ens*. Now, the initial notion of *ens* does not belong to metaphysics only, but to every science, even to every human thought. If this were the object of metaphysics, then all sciences and all thoughts would be metaphysics. The notion of God as *Ipsum Esse* is not the object of metaphysics either: it is instead the reality that explains the many we want to study. The many "beings" as such are not the

16 There are other notions of being between these two to which we will not refer now. On the progression of the notion of *ens* in metaphysics, cf. Tavuzzi, 210.

17 This is related to Aquinas' claim that metaphysics' "*speculabile*" object is attained by means of separation, that is, of negative judgments of a certain kind. Mathematics attains its own "*speculabile*" by means of formal abstraction and (Aristotelian) physics by means of total abstraction. Cf. Aquinas, *In Boethii De Trinitate*, q. 5, a. 1, c. and a. 3, c. I will discuss this in more detail in section 7 of this article.

object of metaphysics either: they can be said to be the “material object,” the object we want to make sense of, but they are not the *formal* object, that is, the point of view from which we see the material object in this particular science. The many beings are the object of metaphysics only insofar as they all “are” and this not in any sense but in the sense of “participating *esse*.” In fact, God also “is,” but not in the same sense other things “are:” this is why God is not the formal object of metaphysics. Therefore, that “universal” (in the sense of general, common) notion which allows us to consider things as objects of metaphysics is the notion of *ens* as “that which participates *esse*.” This notion is found at the end of the resolution *secundum rationem*.

2. The Notion of Participation and Metaphysics

The notion of participation is operative in metaphysics from the beginning but grows in “intensity,” so to speak. At first, in the resolution *secundum rem*, participation denotes a factual characteristic of beings: the limited realization of a certain perfection. This initial notion is the one used in the Fourth Way and in the critical justification of the principle of causality (“that which is by participation is necessarily caused by something which is *per se*”). Later, in the resolution *secundum rationem*, the notion of participation is included in the very notion of being (that is, being is ‘defined’ as “that which in a finite way participates *esse*”) and appears as the notion which is able to define the relationship of creatures to God, or better said, “creatureliness” itself. Finally, in the composition *secundum rem*, the notion of participation is expanded in its analytical requirements: that which is participated is composed and caused. In my view, the initial notion of participation does not imply a real composition (at least, not the composition between essence and act of being in the strong sense) but simply a limited realization of a certain perfection. This initial notion of participation leads us to affirm the necessary existence of the cause, whereas the final notion of participation leads us to affirm—

regarding every finite being—the necessary condition of *being caused*.

3. The Principle of Causality and Metaphysics

Through resolution *secundum rem*, and thanks to the initial notion of participation, we arrive at God as First Cause of (at least) *some* beings. I say “some” and not “all” because the point of departure of the Five Ways is always a fact of experience and nobody has experience of all beings. Now, once we have made resolution *secundum rationem*, and see that *all* beings other than the First Being are beings by participation, we may proceed to the conclusion that *all* beings by participation must be caused by the *Ipsium Esse Subsistens*, that is, have *esse* as received from the *Ipsium Esse*. Therefore, it is not the same to say that God must exist, because a First Motor or a First Cause is necessary (ST I, q. 2, a. 3), as to say that all beings must be created (caused) by God, because they are beings by participation (ST I, q. 44, a. 1).¹⁸

V. ADVANTAGES OF THIS VIEW OF METAPHYSICS

This view of metaphysics explains several features of Thomistic doctrine, namely:

- That the existence of God is presupposed in the argument for the essence-being composition in every creature.

¹⁸ In the Fourth Way, St. Thomas seems to descend to all beings, but 1) perhaps, he is not making a point regarding all created beings; his focus is *God as cause* of all those beings having pure perfections which he has mentioned at the beginning; 2) or, if he is really referring to all beings, it still remains necessary to arrive first at the existence of the *maximum* through the perception of a “more and less” in *some* beings (as in metaphysical resolution *secundum rem*) in order to see this *maximum* as cause of *all* beings other than Him (as in metaphysical composition *secundum rem*). In my view, Aquinas’ alleged reference to God as universal cause in this second part of the *via* seems due to the fact that the *maxime Ens* is more easily recognized as God if it is seen as cause of all beings, that is, as Creator.

- That the notion of participation is operative from the beginning (Fourth Way, principle of causality) even if this notion acquires all its pregnancy later in the process.
- That, even if the object of metaphysics is not God, for the above mentioned reasons, God is necessarily studied in metaphysics, on the one hand, as the cause of metaphysic's object (participated being) and, on the other hand, as that which allows the metaphysical notion of *ens* to be formed and to be critically sustainable. In other words, the existence of God as *ipsum esse* is the only thing allowing us to speak of participation as characteristic of *every* being and not simply as a factual observable characteristic of some beings. This is because the *ipsum esse subsistens* can be one only and, therefore, if other things are, then they must be by participation.

VI. THE PATH OF METAPHYSICS IN TERMS OF PARTICIPATION

In order to understand the following remarks, we need to introduce the notions of argumentation *quia* and *propter quid*. To argue *quia* means to argue by means of extrinsic causes, that is, to argue using final cause and efficient cause, through the principle of causality. It is to reason from cause to effect or from effect to cause. To argue *propter quid*, instead, is to argue by means of the formal cause, by that which defines or determines things in their own being, and to go from there to deduce the necessary predicates which follow. Argumentation *quia* finishes in necessary conclusions of fact ("God exists," "every real *ens* must be composed of essence and being"), whereas argumentation *propter quid* finishes in formally necessary predicates ("*ens* is that which participates *esse*;" "*verum* is the adequacy of being and intellect").

So let us now see the path of metaphysics in terms of the notion of participation. In this way, we will see how the notion of participation is central to metaphysics.

1. (Resolution *secundum rem*) The fact that some beings are seen to be by participation (participation as “partial realization of any perfection”), makes necessary that a being *per essentiam* exists (Fourth Way). The argumentation is *quia*. We finish in a judgment of fact and in “understanding” a real being (God). We must clarify that we cannot understand God’s essence in itself, but we understand that God must be this *ipsum esse subsistens*.¹⁹
2. (Resolution *secundum rationem*) The fact that there is actually a being *per essentiam*, necessitates that, if other things are, they all must be by participation (participation as “taking part in” or even “receiving” a real perfection). Argumentation is *propter quid*: we proceed from the many notions of being (material and immaterial, mutable and immutable, substantial and accidental, etc.) to the one and only notion of being which applies to all of them because it is the most universal (*i.e.* the notion of being as “that which in a finite way participates *esse*”). We finish in the understanding of a concept, *ratio* or notion: *ens* as that which in a finite way participates *esse*.
3. (Composition *secundum rem*) Now the fact that every being (other than the *Ipsum Esse*) is by participation, necessitates that every being be composed of essence and being (being as *esse* or *actus essendi*). Argumentation is *quia*, insofar as the understanding of the cause as *Ipsum Esse Subsistens* leads us to reinterpret its effects as necessarily composed. We finished in the understanding of real beings and in judgments of fact: for example, “all beings must be composed.”
4. (Composition *secundum rationem*) In the light of the metaphysical notion of being, we reinterpret common notions (the transcendentals, the nine categories, etc.).

19 Cf. Tavuzzi, “Aquinas on Resolution in Metaphysics,” 212.

Here we have the deduction²⁰ of the transcendentals among other topics. Argumentation is *propter quid*, insofar as the understanding of one more-universal notion (*ens*) helps us in the reinterpretation of many less-universal notions.

Notice that resolution *secundum rem* ends up in God as *Ipsum Esse Subsistens*, whereas resolution *secundum rationem* ends up in *ens* as “that which participates esse.” The first resolution ends up in a real being (God) whereas the second resolution ends up in a notion²¹ (*ens* as that which participates *esse*).

VII. RESOLUTION AND SEPARATION IN METAPHYSICS

Resolution and separation are related notions in Aquinas’ understanding of metaphysics. Even if *both* resolutions can be said to relate to separation, the discussion regarding metaphysics’ method focuses explicitly on the role of separation in resolution *secundum rationem*. In fact, St. Thomas speaks about separation in metaphysics when he explains how metaphysics has access to its own formal object,²² which is *ens qua ens*, not

²⁰ As Fr. Tavuzzi clarified in his Course on Aquinas’ Commentary on Boethius’ *De Trinitate*, “deduction” here does not mean that we find the notion of truth for the first time through this deduction, but that we reinterpret a common notion in light of the metaphysical notion of *ens*. We could say that, by this deduction, we find a rational connection between the notion of *ens* and the notion of truth and thus arrive at a properly metaphysical notion of truth.

²¹ In general, when I say “notion” I neither mean just “concept” nor concept understood as subjective modification; I mean, instead, the concept’s intelligible content, that is, that which we understand through the concept.

²² By means of separation, metaphysics arrives at its proper object of speculation, which is the end of metaphysical resolution *secundum rationem*. Cf. Aquinas, *In Boethii de Trin.*, q. 5, a. 3, c. and a. 4, c. On the method of access to metaphysics’ formal object, cf. also Villagrasa, “La resolucio come metodo della metafisica secondo Cornelio Fabro,” 51f.

God. This does not take away the fact that, for Aquinas, resolution *secundum rem* also employs separation.²³

Having already explained the meaning of resolution, I will now touch upon the notion of separation. Briefly put, separation is the remotion of something from something else by means of judgment. Separation is therefore a negative judgment.

How does separation relate particularly to metaphysics? For Aquinas, every science has a *speculabile* object, that is, an object of intellectual speculation, an intelligible formal object. An object is intelligible when it is universal and, therefore, somehow separated from matter. Now, speculative sciences are divided according to the object's specific kind of separation from matter. These kinds or even "degrees" of separation from matter are three:

1. Some objects of knowledge can be separated from individual sensible matter (for example, this flesh and these bones) but not from the concept of sensible matter (flesh and bones). In fact, we can think about "dog" without thinking about the particular conditions of this or that dog, but we cannot think about "dog" without thinking about flesh and bones. Objects like these are the common concepts of "natural science," which in the Middle Ages was defined as the science of those things which subsist in a mobile and material condition (*ea quae sunt in motu et materia*).²⁴

This degree of separation from matter is the minimum possible and is called "total abstraction." Total abstraction is made possible by simple apprehension,²⁵ by the mind grasping the essence or quiddity of a particular corporeal being. It is called

23 Regarding metaphysical resolution *secundum rem*, St. Thomas says that we may arrive at knowledge of the causes of sensible things by removing, that is, by separating from them some characteristics proper to sensible things: Tavuzzi, "Aquinas on Resolution in Metaphysics," 212; Aquinas, *In Boethii de Trin.*, q. 6, a. 2, c.; cf. q. 5, a. 4, c. *in finem*.

24 Cf. Aquinas, *In Boethii de Trin.*, q. 5, a. 2.

25 "Abstraction" does not mean here a mental operation directly but rather a certain objective condition which we are able to grasp through a certain

“total” because the particular individual is like a “part” of the species, whereas the essence we abstract is the perfection of the species itself, which could be considered as a “whole” per opposition to the part (the particular individual).

2. Other objects of knowledge can be separated from any kind of sensible matter (flesh and bones) and from any specific kind of substance (iron or wood), but not from the concept of substance as subject of quantification (“something corporeal”). Thus, I can reason about the properties of a triangle without thinking about its sensible qualities (red, blue, hot, hard, soft) and without thinking about the particular substantial matter in which that triangle subsists (iron, wood, etc.). However, I cannot think about a triangle (which is a mode of quantity) without thinking about a material substance in general: it would be like thinking about an accidental property which does not subsist in a substance, which would be absurd.

This degree of separation from matter is called “formal” abstraction, insofar as it separates the different “forms” of quantity from sensible matter and from the individual substance (substance can be considered like an intelligible or common “matter,” “matter” understood as subject). Formal abstraction also is made possible by simple apprehension, insofar as the mind can consider the essence of a triangle separately from its individual and sensible properties. This degree of separation from matter belongs to the object of mathematics.

3. There is a further degree of separation from matter which belongs to those things which, even if they may subsist in matter, do not necessarily subsist in matter. I cannot separate the concept of dog from matter, because a dog without matter would be an absurdity: how could I affirm that a dog is an animal and a corporeal being if I have excluded matter from the concept of dog? However, I can separate matter from the con-

operation. This exegetical distinction is important, because in Aquinas both “total abstraction” and “formal abstraction” belong to the same mental operation (simple apprehension). Cf. Aquinas, *In Boethii de Trin.*, q. 5, a. 3, c. *in finem*.

cept of being, for example, and from the concepts of act and potency: in fact, there are beings which have no matter, and there are acts which do not subsist in matter, and there are potencies which are not material. This is the degree of separation from matter belonging to the object of metaphysics.

This separation is called precisely and simply “separation” and is made possible by judgment, not by simple apprehension. A negative judgment helps me to understand that the concept of being “is not” necessarily tied to matter and, therefore, metaphysical principles apply to all of reality, not only to material reality. If we did not separate the concepts of being and of those things that follow being from matter, then we could not do metaphysics: we would be thinking metaphysical realities as if they were necessarily attached to material conditions and, therefore, we would not understand immaterial realities but only material realities, which is proper to “physics” (natural philosophy) not to metaphysics. What is, then, the necessity of separation in metaphysics? We need this negative judgment in order to properly grasp the formal object of metaphysics, which is the notion of *ens* (as that which participates *esse*) and those things that follow from this notion.

From the above, it may be seen how resolution *secundum rationem* implies separation but is not reduced to separation. Resolution *secundum rationem* requires also the results of resolution *secundum rem* and other reasoning processes in order to arrive at the notion of *ens*. Resolution *secundum rationem* is a process of reasoning from the many notions to the one notion of *ens*, whereas separation is part of this process. Now, because the end of the resolute process is an understanding of *ens* as such, in its highest possible intelligibility and thus in its highest possible separation from matter, separation (as this particular negative judgment we are talking about) is placed at the end of this resolute process as that which ultimately allows us to grasp *ens* as such.²⁶

26 Cf. Tavuzzi, “Aquinas on Resolution in Metaphysics,” 207: “the essen-

How do resolution and separation relate to the goal of metaphysics? Separation is part of the process of resolution *secundum rationem*, whereas resolution *secundum rationem* is part of the process of arriving at the goal of metaphysics. This goal is an understanding, not of *ens* as the notion ultimately explaining reality, but of *reality* (the many) in the light of this notion of *ens* and in the light of reality's efficient cause. This goal is achieved thanks to the compositions *secundum rem* and *secundum rationem*. However, resolution *secundum rationem* is the pivotal part of the metaphysical process and, in this sense, the center and crucial point of metaphysics.²⁷

Resolution *secundum rationem*, then, as including separation, could be expressed in the following way. There are many beings and many kinds of beings; but the *Ipsium Esse Subsistens* can be only one; therefore, it *does not matter* whether a being is material or immaterial, contingent or necessary: all beings after the first being must necessarily be beings by participation. In this way, we separate from the pure notion of (finite) being that it be *necessarily* material or immaterial: being *may be* material but *is not necessarily* so.²⁸

The notion of being (*ens*) goes beyond being material and being contingent, because even immaterial and necessary beings participate *esse*. Again, this is because the *Ipsium Esse Subsistens* can be only one: if other beings are, they must necessarily participate *esse*. This notion of being (*ens*) as "that which in a finite way participates *esse*" is thus established as the formal object of metaphysics, that is, as the aspect according to which something is studied in metaphysics.

We had said that separation relates not only to resolution

tial element (the element which effects it) of scientific resolution is the particular mental operation whereby the intellect can have access to an *obiectum speculabile*."

²⁷ On the method of metaphysics being broader than the method of access to metaphysics' formal object, cf. Villagrasa, "La resolutio come metodo della metafisica secondo Cornelio Fabro," 51–53.

²⁸ Cf. Aquinas, *In Boethii De Trinitate*, q. 5, a. 4, c. *in finem*; Villagrasa, 51.

secundum rationem but also to resolution *secundum rem*. What, then, are the negative judgments allowing us to arrive at the ends of each metaphysical resolution? For the resolution *secundum rem*, Tavuzzi claims that these judgments would be expressed as follows: “not all beings involve potentiality and are material and mutable... there must also be a Being who does not involve potentiality, materiality, and mutability.”²⁹ As we may see, the judgments we employ in the five ways demonstrating the existence of God are judgments of this kind. Regarding the judgments for the resolution *secundum rationem*, Tavuzzi affirms that they could be expressed in the following way: “to the *ratio entis* does not necessarily pertain either the notion of being material or of being immaterial, of being mutable or of being immutable.”³⁰ In order to make this second group of judgments, it seems necessary to presuppose the existence of immaterial beings other than God. These beings can be the separate substances (which are at least possible, insofar as the First Motor *could* move through other immaterial motors) or human souls. In any case, the existence (possible or real) of immaterial beings is studied previously to metaphysics, in “physics” or philosophy of nature and in philosophical anthropology.³¹

CONCLUSION

With these brief remarks, I have tried to suggest a few important principles regarding the nature and method of metaphysics. 1) Metaphysics is a science and therefore requires a log-

29 Tavuzzi, “Aquinas on Resolution in Metaphysics,” 212.

30 Tavuzzi, 216–217.

31 The connection between separation and resolution can be seen in the following way also. Resolution ends in the understanding of a certain unity. Regarding resolution *secundum rem*, the unity which is God as *ipsum esse subsistens* cannot be understood unless it is separated from the mode of being of sensible things and of other finite things. Regarding resolution *secundum rationem*, the unity which is the notion of *ens* as “that which participates *esse* in a finite way” cannot be understood unless it is separated from being necessarily material or immaterial, contingent or necessary, etc. In this sense, separation is necessary in order to arrive at the end of each resolution.

ical, coherent and convincing argumentation. 2) The method of metaphysics is rational and scientific, implying a combination of resolution and composition where the resolution *secundum rationem* allows us to grasp the formal object of metaphysics. 3) In metaphysics there is an order of contents that cannot be altered from a demonstrative point of view. That is, there are certain contents that must be argued first in order to argue other contents in a demonstrative fashion. For example, we cannot demonstrate the composition *essentia-esse* in every being without having demonstrated the existence of God. 4) The notion of *ens* and the notion of participation develop through the course of metaphysics. Thus, the initial notion of being is not yet the formal object of metaphysics and the initial notion of participation (the one we use in the Fourth Way) is not quite the same notion allowing us to demonstrate the composition *essentia-esse* in every being. 5) Metaphysics helps us in understanding the essence of the distinction between Creator and creature (as respectively Being *per essentiam* and being by participation). This kind of distinction not only fosters a sapiential vision of creation but also prevents mistaken distinctions between God and creature (based on Spinoza's and Hegel's philosophies) which actually end up confusing God with creation.³²

* * *

APPENDIX 1: IN WHAT SENSE IS GOD OBJECT OF METAPHYSICS FOR AQUINAS?

In order to see that Aquinas has not changed his doctrine in this regard, let me quote one of Aquinas' late works and another one from his earlier years. In the *Commentary to Aristotle's Metaphysics*, Aquinas' whole prologue clearly shows both that God is not the object of metaphysics and in what sense God can

³² Cf. Andres Ayala, "The Incarnation in Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit and Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion," *The Incarnate Word* 8, no. 2 (December 2011): 45–69.

be considered a metaphysical “object.” I will quote the relevant text only:

From this it is evident that, although this science [i.e., metaphysics or first philosophy] studies the three things mentioned above [i.e., first causes, most universal principles and separate substances], it does not investigate any one of them as its subject, but only being in general. For the subject of a science is the genus whose causes and properties we seek, and not the causes themselves of the particular genus studied; for a knowledge of the causes of some genus is the goal to which the investigation of a science attains. Now although the subject of this science is being in general, the whole of metaphysics is said to regard those things which are separate from matter both in their being and in their notion. For it is not only those things which can never exist in matter that are said to be separate from matter in their being and in their notion, such as God and the intellectual substances, but also those which can exist without matter, as being in general. This could not be the case, however, if their being depended on matter.³³

33 Aquinas, *In Metaphysicorum*, Prooemium, in finem: “Ex quo apparet, quod quamvis ista scientia praedicta tria consideret, non tamen considerat quodlibet eorum ut subiectum, sed ipsum solum ens commune. Hoc enim est subiectum in scientia, cuius causas et passiones quaerimus, non autem ipsae causae alicuius generis quaesiti. Nam cognitio causarum alicuius generis, est finis ad quem consideratio scientiae pertingit. Quamvis autem subiectum huius scientiae sit ens commune, dicitur tamen tota de his quae sunt separata a materia secundum esse et rationem. Quia secundum esse et rationem separari dicuntur, non solum illa quae nunquam in materia esse possunt, sicut Deus et intellectuales substantiae, sed etiam illa quae possunt sine materia esse, sicut ens commune. Hoc tamen non contingeret, si a materia secundum esse dependerent.”

Similar remarks can be read in Aquinas' early *Commentary on Boethius' De Trinitate*. I offer two texts.

Accordingly, because these divine beings are the principles of all things and nevertheless they are complete natures in themselves, they can be studied in two ways: first, insofar as they are the common principles of all things, and second insofar as they are beings in their own right Philosophers, then, study these divine beings only insofar as they are the principles of all things Accordingly, there are two kinds of theology or divine science. There is one that treats of divine things, not as the subject of the science but as the principles of the subject. This is the kind of theology pursued by the philosophers and that is also called metaphysics. There is another theology, however, that investigates divine things for their own sakes as the subject of the science. This is the theology taught in Sacred Scripture.³⁴

There are still other objects of speculative knowledge that do not depend upon matter for their being, because they can exist without matter; either they never exist in matter, as in the case of God and the angels, or they exist in matter in some in-

³⁴ Aquinas, *In Boethii De Trinitate*, q. 5, a. 4 c.: "Huiusmodi ergo res divinae, quia sunt principia omnium entium et sunt nihilominus in se naturae completae, dupliciter tractari possunt: uno modo, prout sunt principia communia omnium entium; alio modo, prout sunt in se res quaedam huiusmodi res divinae non tractantur a philosophis, nisi prout sunt rerum omnium principia Sic ergo theologia sive scientia divina est duplex. Una, in qua considerantur res divinae non tamquam subiectum scientiae, sed tamquam principia subiecti, et talis est theologia, quam philosophi prosequuntur, quae alio nomine metaphysica dicitur. Alia vero, quae ipsas res divinas considerat propter se ipsas ut subiectum scientiae et haec est theologia, quae in sacra Scriptura traditur."

stances and not in others, as in the case of substance, quality, being, potency, act, one and many, and the like. The science that treats of all these is *theology or divine science*, which is so called because the most important thing known in this science is God. By another name it is called *metaphysics*.³⁵

APPENDIX 2: APPROACH TO FABRO'S NOTION OF RESOLUTION

The following exploration of Fabro's notion of resolution may help the reader in understanding why, although I agree in general with Fabro's metaphysical doctrine, I have made very little reference to him in this article. In my view, what Fabro means by resolution is related to what St. Thomas means by resolution but what Fabro means is clearly different. In addition, the order of problems in Fabro's metaphysical path is probably not in line with what I have said in my previous points. I still consider Fabro the best interpreter of St. Thomas' metaphysics because of Fabro's rediscovery of the centrality of the notion of *esse ut actus* and of the role of the notion of participation in Aquinas' doctrine; however, I think that we should not confuse Fabro's doctrine with Aquinas' doctrine on resolution and on the order of problems in metaphysics. This means that, in these specific points (and in my humble view!), Fabro does not appear to foster a precise understanding of Thomistic metaphysics. And, indeed, I consider the precise understanding of these specific points crucial to offering a true Thomistic metaphysics, one that could show more convincingly the harmony between faith and reason.

³⁵ Aquinas, *In Boethii De Trinitate*, q. 5, a. 1, c. in finem: "Quaedam vero speculabilia sunt, quae non dependent a materia secundum esse, quia sine materia esse possunt, sive numquam sint in materia, sicut Deus et Angelus, sive in quibusdam sint in materia et in quibusdam non, ut substantia, qualitas, ens, potentia, actus, unum et multa et huiusmodi. De quibus omnibus est theologia, id est scientia divina, quia praecipuum in ea cognitorum est Deus, quae alio nomine dicitur metaphysica."

I will not make direct reference to Fabro's writings in what follows, so allow me to offer two "excuses." The first is that, as is commonly accepted, Fabro does not offer a systematic treatise on resolution in his major works. The second is that what I have found in the following two authors coincides, for the most part, with the impression I have always had in reading Fabro.

In fact, Villagrasa writes: "Fabro did not produce a systematic study of *resolutio* and in his great metaphysical works he does not cite the text where St. Thomas deals with the method of metaphysics: the commentary *In Boethii de Trinitate* (BDT), q. 6 a. 1."³⁶ Mitchell points out that Fabro does refer to Aquinas' commentary in Fabro's *Course on Metaphysics*:

Metaphysica is important for several reasons: first, we find clear references to St. Thomas's principal text on metaphysical method, *In Boethii De Trinitate*, q. 6, a. 1. Based on this text, Fabro determines that *resolutio* is the proper method of Thomistic metaphysics; at the same time, however, he does not dwell on the distinction between *resolutio secundum rationem et secundum rem*.³⁷

In footnote, Mitchell quotes Villagrasa saying that Cornelio Fabro "makes no reference to the distinction between the two resolutions."³⁸ Mitchell, however, argues that

³⁶ Villagrasa, "La resolutio come metodo della metafisica secondo Cornelio Fabro," 37: "Fabro non ha svolto uno studio sistematico sulla *resolutio*, e nelle sue grandi opere metafisiche non cita il testo dove san Tommaso si occupa del metodo della metafisica: il commento *In Boethii de Trinitate* (BDT), q. 6 a. 1."

³⁷ Mitchell, *Being and Participation: The Method and Structure of Metaphysical Reflection According to Cornelio Fabro*, 345. On Villagrasa's own remarks regarding two resolutions in St. Thomas, cf. Villagrasa, "La resolutio come metodo della metafisica secondo Cornelio Fabro," 61–62.

³⁸ Mitchell, *Being and Participation: The Method and Structure of Metaphysical Reflection According to Cornelio Fabro*, 345.

in later works Fabro does make a quasi-distinction in that he prefers to use '*resolutio*' to describe what pertains to *resolution secundum rationem* (resolution of perfection and act according to intrinsic causes and principles) and "*reductio*" to describe what pertains to *resolutio secundum rem* (reduction of participated *esse* to *Ipsum Esse Subsistens* according to extrinsic causal participation). In fact, A. Contat structures his presentation of Fabro's metaphysics according to the distinction between *resolutio secundum rationem* and *resolutio secundum rem*. See his 'L'étant, l'esse et la participation selon Cornelio Fabro,' *Revue Thomiste* 111 (2011), 357-403.³⁹

In any case, Fabro himself does not emphasize the distinction between the two resolutions. Now, what does Fabro think about resolution? Villagrasa states: "The philosophical project according to Fabro consists in bringing philosophy back to the foundation of metaphysics, and in accomplishing in metaphysics the return or resolution of *ens* to its foundation which is being, *esse ut actus*."⁴⁰ Villagrasa offers also interesting texts from Fabro's works in this regard:

"The method of Thomistic metaphysics is neither intuitive nor demonstrative, but 'resolutive'" (PC⁴¹, p. 63). "The constitutive process of metaphysical reflection is thus that of '*reductio*' this is not the task of abstraction or 'demonstration'

³⁹ Mitchell, 345.

⁴⁰ Villagrasa, "La resolutio come metodo della metafisica secondo Cornelio Fabro," 36: "Il progetto filosofico secondo Fabro consiste nel riportare la filosofia al fondamento della metafisica, e nel compiere nella metafisica il ritorno o *risoluzione* dell'ente al suo fondamento che è l'essere, *l'esse ut actus*."

⁴¹ [Villagrasa's footnote] Cornelio Fabro, *Partecipazione e causalità secondo S. Tommaso d'Aquino* (Torino: Società Editrice Internazionale, 1960) (=PC).

but of 'comprehensive reflection' that is, of clarifying the being of the *ens* in the *esse* as an original act" (PC, p. 229). "It is this 'reductio (or '*resolutio*') ad unum' that constitutes at bottom the method proper to metaphysics, both in its expositive analysis (the forms and modes of predicamental being) as well as in its conclusive synthesis (*ens* by participation and *esse* by essence)" (PC, p. 499).⁴²

According to Villagrasa, "Fabro denies that this notion [resolution] refers to a merely logical procedure (logical analysis); rather, he calls it 'a return to the foundation.'⁴³"⁴⁴ "Both [Aquinas and Heidegger] are essential thinkers, who 'walk backwards,' who seek the foundation of *ens* in the reduction to being."⁴⁵ And, quoting Fabro himself: "the problem lies in the

42 Villagrasa, "La resolutio come metodo della metafisica secondo Cornelio Fabro," 36–37: "Il metodo della metafisica tomistica non è né intuitivo, né dimostrativo, ma "risolutivo" (PC, p. 63). 'Il processo costitutivo della riflessione metafisica è quindi quello della "reductio" questo non è compito di astrazione o di "dimostrazione" ma di "riflessione comprensiva" ovvero di chiarificazione dell'essere dell'ente nell'*esse* come atto originario' (PC, p. 229). 'È questa la "reductio (o '*resolutio*') ad unum" che costituisce in fondo il metodo proprio della metafisica, tanto nella sua analisi espositiva (le forme e i modi dell'essere predicamentale), quanto nella sua sintesi conclusiva (l'ente per partecipazione e l'*esse* per essenza)' (PC, p. 499)."

43 Villagrasa: "The term *reductio* appears to be proper to St. Thomas and does not indicate so much a merely logical process of clarification of explicative resolution (*resolvit*) as rather the 'return to the fundament' and therefore a process of intensive and comprehensive foundation that the rationalistic tradition in the West has completely forgotten' (Cornelio Fabro, "The Transcendentality of "Ens-Esse" and the Ground of Metaphysics," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 3 (September 1966): 47–408)."

44 Villagrasa, "La resolutio come metodo della metafisica secondo Cornelio Fabro," 37: "Fabro nega che tale nozione si riferisca ad un procedimento meramente logico (analisi logica); la chiama piuttosto 'un ritorno al fondamento.'"

45 Villagrasa, 39: "Tutti e due [Aquinas and Heidegger] sono pensatori essenziali, che 'camminano a ritroso,' che cercano il fondamento dell'ente nella riduzione all'essere."

resolutio of this *ens*, that is, in the determination of *esse*, of the act by which it is called an *ens*.”⁴⁶

Villagrasa affirms that “The itinerary of resolution according to Fabro goes from *ens commune* to intensive *esse*”⁴⁷ perhaps in the sense that, as Fabro says, “[the metaphysical] path unfolds departing from the *ens commune* and dividing into the two principal members the ‘ens per participationem’ which is the creature and the ‘ens per essentiam’ which is God.”⁴⁸

In my view, this notion of resolution as grounding *ens* on *esse ut actus*, that is, resolution as understanding *ens qua ens* in the light of *esse*, where *esse* (as intrinsic principle) is the foundation and perfection of everything belonging to *ens*, is a doctrinal point certainly Thomistic and, even if it is related to Aquinas’ notion of resolution *secundum rationem*, it is also different in some respects. Fabro is looking for an answer to a particular problem which is the being of beings, that is, what is it that, in the being (*ens*) itself, explains that it (that is, *ens*) is? Fabro’s answer is *esse ut actus*. Fabro’s answer presupposes resolution *secundum rem*, is related to resolution *secundum rationem* (because *actus essendi* is an intrinsic principle, a “formal” cause) and belongs properly speaking, in my view, to composition *secundum rem* (because it is a judgment of fact regarding the effect, participated being, which is seen in the light of an understanding of the cause). Now, Fabro has neither made explicit distinction between the two resolutions nor does he speak here about composition. Is that relevant? It would be relevant if the truth of

46 C. Fabro, in Aa. Vv., “Dibattito congressuale,” *Sapienza* 26 (1973): 420–421 in Villagrasa, “La resolutio come metodo della metafisica secondo Cornelio Fabro,” 42: “il problema sta nella *resolutio* di questo *ens*, cioè nella determinazione dell’*esse*, dell’atto per cui si dice *ens*.”

47 Villagrasa, 53: “L’itinerario risolutivo secondo Fabro va dall’ *ens commune* all’ *esse* intensivo.”

48 Fabro, *Partecipazione e causalità secondo S. Tommaso d’Aquino*, 204 in Villagrasa, “La resolutio come metodo della metafisica secondo Cornelio Fabro,” 54: “il cui [i.e. della metafisica] cammino si svolge a partire dall’ *ENS COMMUNE* divaricando nei due membri principali l’ ‘ens per participationem’ ch’ è la creatura e l’ ‘ens per essentiam’ che è Dio.”

Fabro's answer were jeopardized by an incoherent argumentation, one that would not respect the order of problems in metaphysics.

Perhaps one should say that Fabro's resolution ends in *esse intensive*, as act of all acts and perfection of all perfections. This *esse intensive* is a notion, the notion generalizing the act of being of every creature, the notion of *esse* which is Fabro's response to the question about the being of beings.⁴⁹ If Fabro's resolution should be understood in this way, then Fabro's resolution ends in the notion of *esse*, whereas Aquinas' resolution *secundum rationem* ends in the notion of *ens* (as that which participates *esse*) and Aquinas' resolution *secundum rem* ends in the *Ipsium Esse Subsistens* which is God. In this sense, Fabro's resolution is related to Aquinas' resolution *secundum rationem* but they are not the same thing. As I suggested, this difference between Fabro and Aquinas could be relevant if it affected the coherence of metaphysical argumentation.

Another way to understand and integrate Fabro's resolution into the Thomistic method is the following.⁵⁰ Fabro's resolution or intensive reflection ends in a notion of *esse intensive*, not though as generalizing the act of being (in the strong sense) of every creature, but rather as comprehensively including and transcending all formal and concrete perfections of all beings. If this is the case, then Fabro's resolution is part of Aquinas' resolution *secundum rem* in a very particular way: resolution as intensive reflection arrives at that notion of being (*esse intensive*) which allows us to order all beings as in degrees, as all of them

49 The terminology "*esse intensive*" could be applied also to God, obviously in a different way (as really possessing and precontaining virtually the perfection of all perfections), but Fabro does not confuse God with created being or with a notion.

50 Although not in complete agreement, the following paragraphs have been inspired by Fr. Barattero's remarks in Alberto Barattero, "Antropología espiritual. Para una antropología de la participación. Aportes de Cornelio Fabro" (PhD diss., Pontifical Athenaeum Regina Apostolorum, 2017), 31–34. However, a proper consideration of his portrayal of Fabro's resolution deserves another paper.

participating being (*esse*). Only this *notional* totality which the mind forms in Fabro's intensive reflection allows us to see finite beings as participating *esse*.⁵¹ But let us clarify immediately: at this point we cannot mean participating *esse* as participating the act of being, but rather as realizing being (that is, *esse intensive*) in a limited way.⁵² This understanding of beings as limited allows us to ascend to God as *Ipsium Esse Subsistens* and only then are we able to understand every other being as participating *esse*, now in a different, stronger sense. In other words, only after the ascent to God can we understand that participating *esse* implies the distinction between essence and *esse ut actus* in every being other than the *Ipsium Esse Subsistens*.

If we integrate Fabro's intensive reflection (understood in this latter sense), then the metaphysical resolution *secundum rem* could follow this order: 1) initial notion of *ens*, simply as the perception of anything that is and, then, the perception of the many different beings which ("equally") are,⁵³ 2) intensive reflection arriving at the notion of *esse intensive*, 3) in the light of this notion, understanding the many beings as beings by partic-

51 Cf. Cornelio Fabro, *La Nozione Metafisica di Partecipazione secondo San Tommaso d'Aquino*, 4th ed., ed. Christian Ferraro, vol. 3, *Opere Complete* (Segni, Italy: EDIVI, 2005), 138 quoted in Barattero, "Antropologia espiritual," 31–34. This notion of *esse intensive* is based on the apprehension of *esse* as *esse in actu* and so it is a true notion (the "abstraction" of something real), even if this notion does not stand for anything real as a notional totality. In fact, *esse intensive* is not the idea of God (because this notion's "transcendence" is an openness to an infinite number of finite possibilities), nor is it the idea of being as an act in the strong sense (because the essence-*esse* distinction has not yet been demonstrated), nor is it a notion of being that can be applied to every *ens* (because it is a comprehensive notion, and each *ens* realizes this notion in a partial way).

52 I have already indicated that the notion of participation develops along the metaphysical path (cf. section IV, subsection 2 of this paper).

53 In my view, there is no real distinction between the operation by which we perceive that something exist, simple apprehension and abstraction. Every simple apprehension is the understanding of "something that is," a formality as *ens*, a formality *and* its presence or actuality. This original syntheticity of human understanding's object explains the appearance of *esse* later in the process of knowledge.

ipation (more developed notion of *ens*), 4) arriving at the first cause as *Ipsum Esse Subsistens* through the principle of causality, as in the Fourth Way. In this way, granted that the same term “resolution” is used by Aquinas and Fabro with different meanings and functions, Fabro’s notion of resolution can be integrated into Aquinas’ resolutive process.⁵⁴

Now, if by this notion of *esse intensive* Fabro means something related to the *esse ut actus* in the strong sense, then it should be explained how we go from intensive reflection to this stronger notion of *esse intensive* without passing through the demonstration of God’s existence. St. Thomas demonstrates the distinction *essentia-esse* presupposing the existence of God.

In Mitchell’s reading of Fabro’s resolution, there seems to be an order of metaphysical problems which is in disagreement with what I have outlined in my previous remarks:

This *resolutio* of accidental act and substantial form to *esse ut actus* is followed by a *reductio* of participated *esse* to *Esse per essentiam* according to the speculative principles of the Fourth Way: the principle of the emergence of act, the principle of separated perfection and the principle of participation. In this *reductio*, Fabro argues that there is a theoretical convergence between the arguments for the existence of God, the demonstration of *creatio ex nihilo* and the *propter quid* argument for the

⁵⁴ How about understanding resolution as arriving at the foundation of *ens*? The foundation of being could be understood in three ways: the efficient cause of being, the formal cause of being or the notion grounding our understanding of being. The efficient cause of being is God as *Ipsum Esse Subsistens*. The formal cause of being is *esse ut actus*. The notion grounding our understanding of being is *ens* as that which participates *esse*. None of this notions is *esse intensive*. However, in my view, the notion of *esse intensive* is the foundation of our understanding being as participant and limited and, in this way, has a necessary role in arriving at the cause of being.

real distinction between essence and *esse* in creatures.⁵⁵

It could be argued, in trying to save the above paragraph's doctrine, that there is a certain understanding of *esse* as a common act which allows us to speak about participated being as we do in the Fourth Way. In this case, however, we would not be understanding *esse ut actus* in the strong sense, that is, in the sense proper to resolution *secundum rationem* and composition *secundum rem*.⁵⁶ It could be argued also that "theoretical convergence" does not necessarily mean that the arguments for each demonstration mentioned in the paragraph above are simultaneous or even equal in content. In any case, it should be out of question that these arguments must follow a certain order. The reason is clear: the arguments for God's existence, finite being's created condition and finite being's radical composition *essentia-esse* end up in different conclusions, as per my previous remarks (their conclusions have different subjects, different predicates and are different kinds of judgment). Now, different conclusions cannot be achieved by the same premises but by different ones. It is clear that multiplicity of premises and conclusions are not brought to unity unless by a certain order. Moreover, there is a theoretical necessity of proving God's existence before proving the essence-being composition in every creature, as per my previous remarks.

I would like to reflect upon another text. In Mitchell's view, for Fabro, "In order to come to an ultimate understanding of being in this life, the metaphysician needs to relate *ens*—that is 'by participation'—to the *Ens* that is 'by essence'"⁵⁷ This is pre-

⁵⁵ Mitchell, *Being and Participation: The Method and Structure of Metaphysical Reflection According to Cornelio Fabro*, 18. Mitchell's italicized, my underline.

⁵⁶ I think that the principle of separated perfection ("if a certain formality should subsist by itself, it would be only one") is not so much a principle of the Fourth Way as it is a principle of resolution *secundum rationem*.

⁵⁷ Mitchell, *Being and Participation: The Method and Structure of Metaphysical Reflection According to Cornelio Fabro*, 342.

cisely right, and it is what happens in composition *secundum rem*, when we understand the effects (participated beings) in light of the cause already discovered and understood as *Ipsum Esse Subsistens*. Mitchell's footnote appears to suggest the same line of thought: "See C. FABRO, *Introduzione all'esistenzialismo*, 109. This point recalls St. Thomas's text from *De Potentia*, q. 3, a. 5 ad 1 which holds that the *esse* of created things (effect) cannot be understood unless it be as "deduced" from divine *esse* (cause)."⁵⁸ St. Thomas' text reads: "Although the first cause that is God does not enter into the essence of creatures, yet being which is in creatures cannot be understood except as derived [*deductum*] from the divine being: even as a proper effect cannot be understood save as produced [*deductum*] by its proper cause."⁵⁹ If one prefers the translation "deduced", one is saying not that the understanding of the cause necessitates the existence of the effects (something which St. Thomas would not admit), but rather that the ultimate understanding of the effect (participated being) is conditioned by an understanding of the cause. If one prefers instead the translation of the English Dominican Fathers, still the focus is an understanding of participated being as "derived" and as "produced," that is, an understanding of the effect in light of the cause, an understanding of the effect as caused. This is what happens in composition *secundum rem*, not in resolution *secundum rem*. I clarified this because resolution *secundum rem* also relates *ens* by participation to the *Ens* that is by essence, but does not relate them in the same way, as I have previously explained. My worry is that because Fabro neither speaks about composition in metaphysics nor distinguishes between the two resolutions, the methodological prob-

⁵⁸ Mitchell, *Being and Participation: The Method and Structure of Metaphysical Reflection According to Cornelio Fabro*, 342.

⁵⁹ Aquinas, *De Potentia*, q. 3, a. 5, ad 1: "Ad primum ergo dicendum, quod licet causa prima, quae Deus est, non intret essentiam rerum creaturarum; tamen esse, quod rebus creatis inest, non potest intelligi nisi ut deductum ab esse divino; sicut nec proprius effectus potest intelligi nisi ut deductus a causa propria."

lem remains and the coherence of metaphysical argumentation is jeopardized.

Aertsen, on his part, places resolution *secundum rationem* before resolution *secundum rem*:

[W]e saw that in the sixth question of his commentary, Thomas closely connects the method of metaphysics with the method of resolution. He distinguishes two kinds of resolution: a resolution *secundum rationem* that terminates in the consideration of being and of that which belongs to being as such; and a resolution *secundum rem* that terminates in the universal cause of being. The former resolution is the condition for the latter.⁶⁰

For the reasons previously expressed, I do not think that resolution *secundum rationem* can precede resolution *secundum rem*.

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In 1972, Fabro participated in the 4th National Conference of Philosophy Teachers in Faculties, Seminaries and Religious Studentates of Italy (*IV Convegno Nazionale dei docenti di filosofia nelle Facoltà, nei Seminari e Studentati religiosi d'Italia*), held in Assisi, from December 27th to 29th. Fabro's conference was intended to start the discussions.⁶¹ Regarding the debate, Villagrasa affirms that "the general impression from the proceedings

⁶⁰ Jan A. Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy and the Transcendentals: The Case of Thomas Aquinas* (Leiden; New York; Köln: E.J. Brill, 1996), 433 in Mitchell, *Being and Participation: The Method and Structure of Metaphysical Reflection According to Cornelio Fabro*, 25.

⁶¹ Cf. Cornelio Fabro, "Il ritorno al fondamento. Contributo per un confronto fra l'ontologia di Heidegger e la metafisica di S. Tommaso," *Sapienza* 26, nos. 3-4 (1973): 265-278. For the congressional debate, cf. Aa. Vv., "Dibattito congressuale."

is that all the participants agreed in identifying resolution or reduction to the *primum* or *fundamentum* as the essential task of metaphysics, but that it was not at all clear *how to accomplish* the task, this return to the *primum*.⁶²

True, a crucial task of metaphysics is to ground *ens* on *esse ut actus* and no more on consciousness, as modern philosophy does after Kant. This is related to the task of reconnecting creation to the Creator, both by acknowledging His existence as cause and by acknowledging all of reality as created by Him. Now, the *how* in such a crucial task is of the greatest relevance, to the point that this task will not be fulfilled if the methodology is flawed. I hope to have made this clearer and to have indicated a path towards the achievement of this task.

62 Villagrasa, “La resolutio come metodo della metafisica secondo Cornelio Fabro,” 40: “l’impressione generale che si ricava dagli atti è che tutti i partecipanti erano d’accordo nell’identificare la risoluzione o riduzione al *primum* o al *fundamentum* come il compito essenziale della metafisica, ma che non era affatto chiaro *come realizzare* il compito, questo ritorno al *primum*.”

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